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Title: Review of *Person and Values in Pragmatic Phenomenology: explorations in moral metaphysics* (Delaware/Malaga: Vernon Press, 2018). 224 pp. Hardback. ISBN: 978-1622732678 by J. Edward Hackett.

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Review of *Person and Values in Pragmatic Phenomenology*: explorations in moral metaphysics (Delaware/Malaga: Vernon Press, 2018). 224 pp. Hardback. ISBN: 978-1622732678 by J. Edward Hackett.

One of the great, and largely unsung, contributions that British philosophers made in the 20th century was clarity. Strawson, Austin, Ayer, even Russell: paragons of the form; philosophical writing *par excellence*. Whether or not we agreed with them, we understood them: we knew what they were talking about and, by and large, why. Hence, to every philosophical neonate, they and their kind were lionised; they were the ideal to which we aspired. If, that is, we ever hoped to write anything worth reading. Clarity, simplicity, focus: such were our primary goals as nascent philosophers. ‘It doesn’t matter how clever you are (or think you are) if no one understands a damn word you say.’ We were told this very often. My teachers said, ‘Your ideal reader is an intelligent sixteen-year-old. If you can’t explain your ideas to her, then either something is wrong with you or something is wrong with your ideas.’

J. Edward Hackett’s *Persons and Values in Pragmatic Phenomenology* would, I suspect, leave most sixteen-year-olds utterly baffled; indeed, some of us who are – *ahem* – a year or two older found it a little hard going. The fault cannot, I think, lie entirely with the ideas, since these appear fairly sound, as far as I can tell. What we have here is an ambitious attempt to weave together the phenomenology of Max Scheler with the pragmatism of William James, the aim being to create a mutually supportive and richly textured tapestry which Hackett calls Participatory Realism. I am not especially fond of philosophical labels just because they can easily mislead; exactly what is meant by ‘realism,’ let alone ‘participation,’ has yet to be universally agreed upon and how we understand such terms will depend largely on our philosophical training. What’s more, communicative clusterfuffles are so easily exacerbated by the tendency of philosophical labels to become a kind of shorthand, bypassing careful consideration and encouraging the inevitable conclusionary jump.

Despite being rather too keen to coin this particular nomenclature (one is ineluctably reminded of someone building a wagon that a band might jump on it), nevertheless, Hackett spends the greater part of his book drawing out the Schelerian and Jamesian parallels before entwining them into a conception of persons which may well be both original and metaphysically interesting. Whether or not the (qualified) fideistic component of pragmatism – which, *under certain circumstances*, permits faith to create its objects, objects such as justice, friendship, perhaps even our humanity – really would prove compatible with the pre-reflective immediacy of phenomenological encounters is difficult to say. By focusing on intentional action, or the ‘being-of-an-act’ as he dubs it, Hackett certainly has the right tools to hand, as it were. Unfortunately, the book is so poorly written, it is all but impossible to determine exactly what he does with them. The text is littered with careless typographical errors, incorrect punctuation, and crass solecisms, so much so that those in search of examples need only grab a pin and the Old Prophet will undoubtedly oblige. The principal consequence of, most especially, the awful grammar is that the reader is obliged to spend most of their time correcting it in order to see if what the author has said makes sense; but even if he or she should manage to re-route both Alfeió and Pineió, they will be left wondering whether the resulting sentences are, in fact, what the author is actually trying to say.

Unfortunately, when our author does approach something like clarity, or at least when we (think we) know what he means, the writing is not strong. Signposting is repetitive and clunky while transitions are awkward and abrupt. Despite, apparently, opening the door to ‘those unfamiliar with [Scheler’s] work’ (p. 1), the text abounds with unexplained technical jargon or what sounds like it, such as ‘[t]he “how of values” (if we were to call it that);’ (thank you, but I’d rather not). Examples do not work or do not work well enough to exemplify and explain: the colour blue (p. 4), for instance, does not illuminate the notion of essences because colours are not essences, they are phenomenal qualities. Similarly, forgetting to do one thing while doing another does not explain the notion ‘mood,’ nor does it exemplify the way in which ‘[t]hrough mood, Dasein is always brought before itself’ (p. 74). Unless, that is, ‘mood’ is being used as yet another unexplained technical term. Occasionally, the reader is faced with an agglomeration of deeply infuriating errors, as when ‘[s]omeone asked Heidegger when are you going to write an ethics, and to this Heidegger revealed that for him ethics was about a type of comportment one maintains to beings. In other words, Heidegger observed the question about an ethics is one of comportment’ (p. 81). Not only ungrammatical and badly punctuated but also, and crucially, *not ‘in other words.’ In exactly the same words!*

As the writing is clumsy, so the reasoning all too often follows suit. Logico-linguistic trip hazards include the curious conjunction of ‘thing-like language’ with Plato’s idealism (p. 80). Early on, we encounter the claim that ‘participation is partly embodied’ (p. XXII); but if only ‘partly,’ then what of the part *not* embodied? What, in short, does it mean to say that participation is partly *disembodied*? Not a great deal, I suspect. The reader is also informed that persons cannot be objectified. This bizarre suggestion is, of course, entirely false, both factually and logically, as Hackett himself demonstrates by depersonalising persons by using the impersonal pronoun. Persons are not, that is, ‘he,’ ‘she,’ or ‘they;’ persons, for Hackett, are it-objects; the question he asks is ‘[h]ow is the person revealed in the very experience of *itself*?’ (p. XVII, emphasis added). This matters because the ways in which we talk and think about people affects how we behave towards them. Describe me as an ‘it’ and you have taken the first and most important step in treating me as one. Besides this, people are, as a matter of fact, objectified all the time; the merest glance at any news media or five minutes surfing the internet will confirm it. If this were not true, of course, morality would have neither point nor purpose. That is why Kant formulated a *second* categorical imperative: to remind us that others are *not merely* the means to our ends.

If all this seems like curmudgeonly nit-picking, then again I invite the reader to spend a moment Drawing the Sortes and comparable examples of poor writing, great quantities of them, will be found. The errors are ubiquitous, so much so that the reader’s sympathy, so very badly needed, is sapped to the point where it is difficult to accept anything this book has to offer. One expends so much effort on puzzling out what has been said, mentally correcting the typos and grammatical errors, wading through the dense, over-complicated, and frequently obtuse writing style, that one has energy left for little but doubting everything our author says. Evidently, he has no interest at all in his readers. He does not care to bring them along or to engage with them; he does not care to shine a light on his ideas and thereby illuminate *our* understanding of his subject matter. I very much doubt whether he had any reader at all in mind when he sat down to write. My guess is that, like so many academic books and articles we see today, *Person and Values* was written to be published and not to be read. This is a great shame because somewhere buried deep inside all this sound and fury, there is a good

and important philosophical idea: Hackett is absolutely right to regard action, participation, as the key to a moral and metaphysical understanding of persons. But he is absolutely *wrong*, painfully, exasperatingly wrong, to adopt a mode of expression which utterly undermines this point by making it impossible for readers to participate actively in his project.

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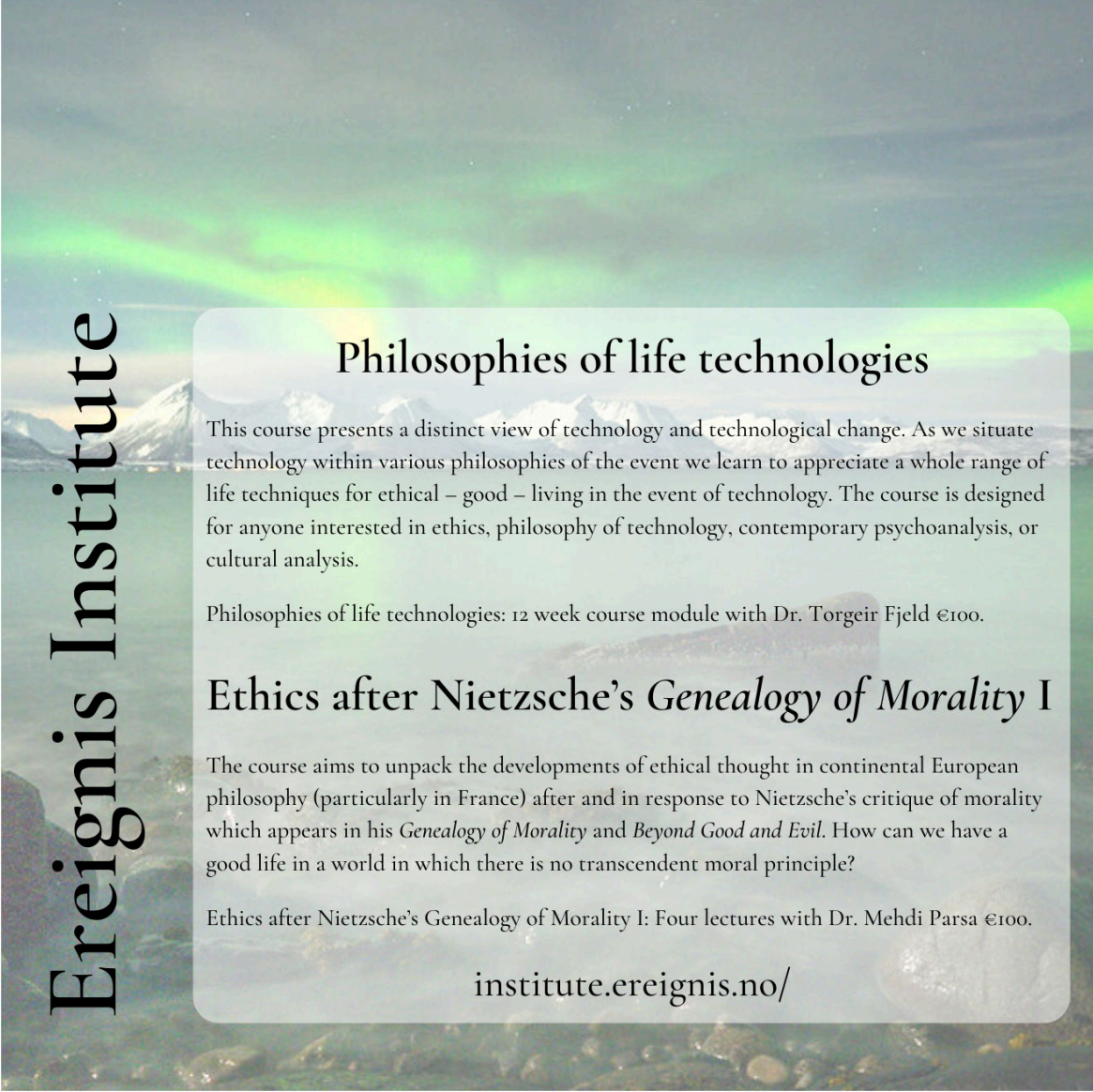
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